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Watching subtitled tv series: Does it facilitate comprehension?

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Abstract:

Watching TV series, films, documentaries, or any kind of multimedia material has become very popular over the last few years. Teenagers make use of this easy to find multimodal input in an entertaining way, but, what is more interesting is that they often watch it in its original version, either with subtitles in English, in Spanish or without subtitles. This is great news for ESL teachers, who can take advantage of this new trend in “TV watching” and use it as a way of motivating students, as well as a learning tool. In order to test if the presence of L2 subtitles facilitates content comprehension of TV viewing, two groups of pre-intermediate Spanish students of English as a foreign language (EFL) watched a 23 minutes long episode of an American TV series either with L2 subtitles or without subtitles. After the viewing, participants took a content comprehension test. The results revealed that at this level there was no significant difference in comprehension between these two groups of students.

Keywords: subtitles, EFL, teaching methods, tv watching, comprehension

Resum:

Mirar sèries de televisió, pel·lícules, documentals o qualsevol altre tipus de material multimèdia s'ha fet molt popular al llarg dels últims anys. Els adolescents fan ús d'aquest input visual, que és fàcil de trobar, com a mitjà d'entreteniment. Però, el que és més interessant és que sovint el miren en la seva versió original fent ús de subtítols en anglès, en castellà o sense subtítols. Això són molt bones notícies pel professorat d'anglès com a llengua estrangera, ja que poden aprofitar-se d'aquesta nova moda de “mirar la televisió” i utilitzar-la com una manera de motivar-los, al mateix temps que la poden utilitzar com a eina d'aprenentatge. Per tal de provar si la presència de subtítols ajuda a la comprensió de contingut a l'hora de mirar una sèrie en anglès, dos grups d'estudiants espanyols de nivell pre-intermig d'anglès com a llengua estrangera, van mirar un episodi de 23 minuts de durada d'una sèrie nord-americana amb subtítols en L2 o sense subtítols. Després de la visualització de l'episodi, els participants van fer un test de comprensió. Els resultats van revelar que no van haver diferències significants en relació a la comprensió entre els dos grups d'estudiants.

Paraules clau: subtítols, anglès com a llengua estrangera, mètodes d'ensenyament, televisió, comprensió
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1 INTRODUCTION

Nowadays there are no excuses when it comes to learning a foreign language using authentic language input. Currently, more than ever, learners can have access to rich audiovisual and listening material in order to improve their knowledge of English. They only need a computer, a smartphone or a tablet and internet connection. It might not be feasible for some of them to have access to platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO, etc. but nearly all of them can use YouTube or any other free access websites. Some learners watch films or TV series at home in their original versions, either with subtitles in L1, in L2 or without them. Furthermore, playing videogames online with participants from different countries has promoted the use of English as a good means of communication, if not the main one.

Being a teacher myself, I am particularly keen on finding new ways of teaching and of motivating my students to learn English (not only in the classroom, but also once they leave it). In this sense, watching films or TV series in English seems to be an excellent way to do so, but I would like to know to which extent watching them with L2 subtitles can facilitate the overall comprehension of material watched in English and whether it provides significant difference when watching them with no subtitles at all. It is this type of input this study will address.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Positive effects of using authentic audiovisual material as a teaching tool

Some piece of evidence leads to believe that using authentic audiovisual material as a teaching tool has many positive aspects and teachers should take advantage of it.

According to Etemadi (2012, p. 239) “using films to teach a foreign language can help motivate students and remove some of the anxiety of not knowing the language. However, they are not just entertainment; they are also a valuable teaching tool.” That is, teachers should not only see them as a way of entertaining students, instead, they have to find ways of making this tool as something pedagogically useful.

Danan (2004) also observes the motivation that watching films can infer in learners and adds the improvement of listening skills that can be reached thanks to the use of authentic audiovisual material. Thus, Herron et. al. (1995) state that “in addition, film, television, video, and now digitized images usually expose students to larger

amounts of authentic oral language input, which in the long run should improve listening comprehension in face-to-face interaction with native speakers.” (as cited in Danan, 2004, p. 68)

Herron, Dubreil, Corrien & Cole (2002), mention the importance of films “as a way to enhance cultural knowledge”, as cultural proficiency is something that has to be included as part of the FL itself.

Brinton (2001) points out that “the use of multimedia is also advocated because (a) it allows for the provision of authentic input and thus exposure to target culture, (b) it motivates learners, and (c) it accounts for students’ different learning styles.” (as cited in Sydorenko, 2010, p. 50)

To sum up, there seem to be enough good reasons to use multimedia in the classroom, since it can provide students with aspects that the context of the classroom on its own cannot provide.

2.2 The impact of subtitles on language learning

Although this study is going to focus on watching a particular TV series with subtitles in L2 and watching the same TV series without them, it is worth mentioning that there are multiple ways of using subtitles in the classroom. Katchen, Lin, Fox and Chun (2002) describe the following six possible combinations of subtitles:

- 1) Standard Subtitling (L2 audio with L1 subtitles)
- 2) Bimodal Subtitling (L2 audio with L2 subtitles)
- 3) Reversed Subtitling (L1 audio with L2 subtitles)
- 4) Bilingual Subtitling (L2 audio with L2 and L1 subtitles simultaneously)
- 5) Bilingual Reversed Subtitling (L1 audio with L1 and L2 subtitles simultaneously)
- 6) No Subtitling (L1 audio no subtitles at all)

2.2.1 Use of Standard Subtitling (L2 audio and L1 subtitles)

To which extent L1 subtitles are profitable in terms of language learning is an issue that has largely been discussed by many authors. Some of them believe that L1 subtitles lack of benefits in pedagogical terms, while others do not seem to reach a general consensus on which condition is better (L1 or L2 subtitles).

Concerning this matter, Katchen, Lin, Fox and Chun (2002) state that L1 subtitles can help to follow the plot easily, but they lack benefit when it comes to language learning, as the use of them develops dependence upon the subtitles.

Authors like Danan (2004, p. 72) have gathered evidence that L1 subtitles do not weaken simultaneous processing of the oral message, but she is fully aware that “detractors of interlingual subtitles in the context of second-language acquisition may still argue that if students can simply read their native language, they will stop listening to the foreign dialogue.”

On the other hand, researchers do not seem to fully agree on whether subtitles are more suitable to be used in L1 or in L2, as results have been controversial. Following this, Vulchanova et al. (2015) claim that:

Whether subtitles in the L1 (also called interlingual) or in the L2 (intralingual subtitles) in an auditory context are more facilitative has been debated, with experiments showing controversial results depending on the aspect of language being tested and the age and level of proficiency of the participant. (p. 2)

It is interesting that Bianchi and Ciabattini (2008) state that: “L1 subtitles were more facilitatory for the less proficient learners, whereas L2 subtitles were more facilitatory for the more advanced learners in their study.” (as cited in Vulchanova et al., 2015, p. 2). Thus, Bianchi and Ciabattini (2008) suggest that choosing between L1 subtitling or L2 might be considered taking into account the students’ level of proficiency in English. In contrast, the results from a study carried out by Vulchanova et al. (2015, p. 7) suggested the opposite, as they “indicate that for more advanced students, the language of the subtitles is of a lesser importance, whereas for less advanced students, L2 subtitles were in fact more facilitatory”.

It can be concluded that there is no general consensus when referring to the pedagogical benefits of L1 subtitling and, those who believe that L1 subtitling can have positive results, do not quite agree on deciding whether subtitles should be provided in L1 or in L2.

2.2.2 Use of Bimodal Subtitling (L2 audio with L2 subtitles)

To begin with, it should be mentioned that, although captions were first thought for deaf and hearing-impaired, thanks to the work of Karen Price (1983), it has been known that

they can be used for non-native speaker viewers in order to have access to foreign language visual productions. Price's (1983) main thesis was very clear, as she affirmed that:

Increasing comprehensibility facilitates language acquisition. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that if captions assist the learner to understand a message expressed in a foreign language at a level a little beyond his usual level of comprehension without assistance, they may actually contribute to language learning. (p. 8)

There was huge enthusiasm among teachers when this new way of presenting audiovisual productions to learners came up, but questions soon arose around this revolutionary way of using captions, since it was unclear whether the use of captions would improve or rather impair viewing comprehension. Teachers also realised that some of their students were unable to follow the dialogues due to the rate of speech. Big research has been done on the use of captions and their pedagogical benefits and, although most researchers seem to agree on their benefits, enormous discussion has been carried out throughout the years regarding this issue.

Focusing on bimodal subtitling, it has proven to be a good means of improving reading, listening and vocabulary skills. But this would only apply to students with high English proficiency levels, as those with low English proficiency ones, would find it difficult to hold on with the speed of spoken English as used by native speakers of English and L2 subtitles would not be of much help (Katchen, Lin, Fox and Chun, 2002)

Taylor (2005, p. 423) stresses the same idea by asserting that "the majority of the studies in captioning have used intermediate to advanced students and in fact there appears to be a consensus that captioning can only be effective at the higher proficiency levels". Moreover, Taylor (2005, p. 426) also adds that subtitling can be distracting for beginners: "It seems that students with little background in reading and listening in the target language have difficulty attending to the three channels and are confused or distracted by the use of captions." In this light, he conducted a study with students at their first stages of Spanish learning. The aim was to learn if using videos with captions was beneficial for beginning learners of Spanish. One group watched a video with subtitles in Spanish and the other one without subtitles. Each group was on different stages of learning, as one group was in their first year of Spanish and the other one had been studying Spanish for three or four years. The scores obtained for each group on the

comprehension tests were then compared, revealing that students on their third or fourth year performed better than first year students when watching the captioned video, but scores did not differ when watching it without captions regardless of level. According to Taylor (2005, p. 426): "The study appears to confirm that captioning might not be as effective for enhancing beginning learners' comprehension as it is for more experienced learners."

Danan (2004) also believes in the benefits of using subtitles at high proficiency levels and includes that, when it comes to beginners, the material should be adapted to their level of proficiency in English:

[...] Captioning may not be suitable for all materials and viewers at all levels of language proficiency. In particular, it may be helpful to beginners only if the material is carefully adapted to their level and contains many familiar phrases that can be activated and reinforced by the audiovisual presentation. [...] Therefore, even with captions, massive exposure to authentic audiovisual material which has not been carefully enough selected or made accessible to non-native viewers can be a very inefficient pedagogical approach. (p. 71)

That is, captions or subtitles on their own might not be suitable for efficient learning of a foreign language, unless it has previously been carefully selected and adapted to the learner's level of proficiency.

Other authors, like Guillory (1998, p. 95, 102) also stress that subtitling might not be enough to compensate for the fast rate of speech, being the use of a keyword method a way to help in the content comprehension. In order to prove this, he ran a study using a keyword captioning method believing that, if learners were presented with less to read, it would not undermine their comprehension of the information provided in the spoken message. Thus, three different typologies were used: full text, keywords and no-text. The results of the experiment went as follows: the keywords group surpassed the no-text one and the full text group surpassed the keywords group. Spite of this, a post-hoc analysis showed no real difference between the means of the full text group and the keywords group, demonstrating that a keyword method can help in the content comprehension of a clip watched in a foreign language.

Worth to mention is that the material provided to the students should be challenging enough as to awake in them motivation towards learning English, but not so

much as to discourage them in their process of learning. In other words, this tool should be used efficiently in order to get good pedagogical results. Krashen (1985) in order to make it comprehensible:

Input can only be slightly above the students' level of proficiency, and he advocates a stage by stage approach to the introduction of comprehensible input by language teachers (through, for example, the choice of somewhat simplified language or limited topics). (as cited in Danan, 2004, p. 71)

Even though according to Birulés-Montané and Soto-Faraco (2016, p. 2) “there is controversy regarding the consequences of the different subtitling conditions and the relation to the listener's proficiency.”, all in all, most authors seem to agree that L2 subtitles can be beneficial, both in terms of learning and of motivation, when used efficiently according to the students' level of proficiency. On the other hand, some authors believe that beginners can benefit from subtitles when using adapted material to their level of English, but others, such as Guilmore (2007) “nevertheless argues that authentic input should not be adapted to the proficient learner when exposing SLA learners to input in the target language.” (as cited in Vulchanova et al., 2015, p. 1)

2.2.3 L2 audio without subtitles

Some research seems to lead to the conclusion that, when students have an intermediate level of proficiency in English, subtitles or captions should be avoided. In line with this statement, Lavaur and Bairstow (2011) state that:

Participants with an intermediate fluency level should have a lesser need for subtitles, their knowledge being sufficient to extract a global understanding of the situation. The addition of subtitles, however, should produce contradictory effects: Subtitles should provide these viewers with a more in-depth comprehension, but as they will be compelled to read the subtitles, they will also be distracted. (p. 458)

Katchen, Lin, Fox and Chun (2002) defend that, if students can follow the speed of speech and understand the clip without subtitles, then it can be a useful tool to challenge and develop their listening comprehension skills.

2.2.4 Choosing between using subtitles in L2 or no subtitles

Different studies targeting at comparing whether watching original films or TV series with subtitles enhance better plot comprehension than watching them with no text have been carried out. Most of them indicate that learners get better comprehension results when viewing a video with subtitles (either in L1 or in L2) than when viewing it without them. Spite of this, other studies show no significant differences on comprehension test results in either condition (subtitles and no subtitles).

Concerning the first instance, Birulés-Muntané and Soto-Faraco (2016) conducted a study in which a group of Spanish students of English watched a drama TV series episode in English with English, Spanish or no subtitles. They took a test on listening and vocabulary prior the watching of the video and a comprehension test afterwards. The results on the listening skills being that the group that watched the episode with subtitles in English outperformed the other two groups. The vocabulary test did not show reliable differences concerning subtitled conditions. As for the comprehension test, the scores were better for the group with Spanish subtitles, as they outperformed the ones using L2 subtitles who, on the other side, outperformed participants who watched the TV series without subtitles. Thus, the learners that watched the video with subtitles (either in L1 or in L2) performed better than those that watched the video with no subtitles.

In this context, Etemadi (2012) also ran a study with the goal of studying the impact of subtitling on content comprehension. Forty-four senior undergraduate students were chosen from two classes of Tapes and Films Translation course at Shiraz Islamic Azad University. They were divided in two groups that watched two BBC documentary movies (*Dangerous knowledge* and *Where's my robot?*), one with L2 subtitles and the other without subtitles. After watching the documentaries both groups took a vocabulary and a comprehension test. The results were then compared, and they showed that the participants had a better comprehension of the documentaries when watched with subtitles. In this sense, Etemadi (2012, p. 239) claims that “the use of subtitled movies has been proved to be more effective at improving overall listening comprehension than non-subtitled movies.”

Vulchanova et al. (2015) carried out a study with Norwegian learners of English that aimed to investigate the effect of subtitles in comprehension when watching authentic audiovisual material. Students of two age groups (16-year-old and 17-year-old) were divided into three. One group watched an episode of an American cartoon (*Family Guy*)

with Norwegian subtitles, another group with English subtitles and the third one watched it without subtitles. Results being that the group that watched the episode without subtitles underperformed to the groups that watched it with subtitles (either in L1 or in L2). This piece of evidence allowed Vulchanova et al. (2015, 7) to conclude that “the results from both participant groups thus confirmed the overall initial hypothesis that having subtitles available would enhance the participants’ performance, at least on the comprehension questionnaire.”

As regards to the second set of researches, Felek and Durmusoglu (2013) ran a study which focused on the effects of L2 captions, L1 captions (Turkish) and no captions in a group of 30 Grade-8 primary school EFL intermediate learners. They watched a segment of the film *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* in one of the three conditions pointed out before and were tested on comprehension afterwards. There were no significant differences on the results of the tests.

Having said that, one can think about the pros and cons of using subtitles. In this respect, many authors agree that subtitles are helpful in different ways. Thus, Danan (2004) refers to an empirical study carried out by Borrás and Lafayette which proved that learners who worked with captions had a much more positive attitude than those who did not work with them. She believes that captions act as a reliever of the anxiety that the feeling of having missed something important can cause on learners. Danan (2004, p. 75) affirms that “captioning allows learners to relax, grow more confident in their ability to understand, and direct their mental energy to actual learning.”

Winke et al. (2010, p. 68) stress the importance of integrating written and aural information as well as more native voices by claiming that “they are viewed as an important pedagogical tool because they bring more native voices into the learning environment and help learners integrate written and aural information, which supports language acquisition.”

Focusing on the topic that L2 subtitles can be a great tool to improve different skills in English, as well as a way to motivate students to carry on learning English outside of the school context, Etemadi (2012) claims that:

By using L2 subtitled movies, students can learn how to pronounce many words. Moreover, subtitles can reinforce the understanding of English context-bound expressions and help learners acquire new vocabulary and idioms. Furthermore,

subtitles can motivate learners to study English outside the classroom context by watching English movies, listening to the original dialogues. Finally, it allows learners to follow the plot easily; in other words, to enhance comprehension. (p. 240)

Other authors can see negative aspects on subtitles, as they believe that captions can be distracting. In this context, Koolstra et al. (2002) claim that:

Another possible disadvantage of the use of subtitles is that they might distract the viewer's attention away from the screen. In order to follow a programme, viewers have to alternate their attention to picture and subtitles. When the attention is focused on the subtitle, information provided in the picture might be missed. (p. 331)

Another issue that has been matter of study concerning the cons of subtitles is the loss of information that takes place when using them. Lavaur and Bairstow (2011, p. 457) mentioning Ivarsson & Carroll (1998) claim that "The downside of subtitles is that they can cause a certain amount of information loss: The constraint of using no more than two-line subtitles, with a maximum of 40 characters per line."

3 RESEARCH QUESTION

Taking into account research conducted up to now, the present study aims at answering the following research question:

1. Does the presence of L2 subtitles facilitate content comprehension of TV viewing in pre-intermediate Spanish EFL learners?

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Participants

Twenty students (12 females and 8 males) aged 14-15 volunteered to take part in this study. In this particular secondary school, 3rd of ESO students take two hours per week EFL lessons, two of them with the whole class (around 26 students) and the third one with half of the group (they are divided according to their level of English, so that other kind

of activities more in line with their level of proficiency can be carried out). Moreover, they had been studying English for 9 years and their average level of English was pre-intermediate (A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, from the Council of Europe).

In order to implement this study, they were split randomly into two groups: one group of 10 students (7 females and 3 males) watched an episode of *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* in English with L2 subtitles; and a second group of also 10 students (5 females and 5 males) watched the same episode in English, but without subtitles.

4.2 Materials

Both groups watched an episode of the American teen sitcom *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* (Season 1, Episode 2) called *The fairest of them all*, which lasted around 23 minutes. This episode was selected based on the amusing content and the level of difficulty of English to be adequate for the participants. Zack and Cody are twin brothers who live with their mother in a hotel and who usually get involved in all sorts of troublesome situations. In the episode chosen for the study, the hotel where they live hosts a fashion contest. The day all the contestants arrive, Cody feels immediately attracted to one of the girls (Rebecca) and accidentally decides to disguise himself as a girl. This way, he can take part in the contest and get to know her. Zack is very happy with the idea, because the reward for the winning person is a big amount of money that may help them get new bikes. Rebecca and Cody are the two finalists of the contest, but Cody's fake identity is unveiled while he is on the catwalk, making Rebecca the winner of the fashion show.

4.3 Instruments

The participants were asked to answer a content comprehension test in their L1 after watching the episode (both the episode and the test were provided by the GRAL Group at UB). The aim of this test was to check the degree of understanding of the episode. The questions used at this stage were chosen following Rodgers and Webb (2017). That is, a true/false and a multiple-choice exercise that consisted of 5 items each (examples of the items are shown in figures 1 and 2).

V / F El Sr Moseby no se fía de la madre de Brianna.

V / F London ganó el concurso de belleza en 1998.

Figure 1. First two true/false items on the comprehension test for Episode 2 of *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*

¿Por qué los gemelos quieren unas bicicletas nuevas?

A) Porque han visto unas en un anuncio que les han gustado mucho.

B) Porque sus amigos se han comprado bicis nuevas y ellos también quieren.

C) Porque las que tienen no les gustan.

Figure 2. Item #6 on the comprehension test for Episode 2 of *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*

These two exercises were followed by a third and last one that focused on the sequencing of events on the episode, where the participants were asked to set into the right order the events presented on the exercise. The first and fifth event were provided, so as to help them in the sequencing of events (see Appendix A).

4.4 Procedure

4.4.1 Data Collection

The present study was initially meant to take place with a group of 3rd of ESO students during one of the three curricular lessons of English language that they take every week in their secondary school. Due to the closure of schools as a result of Covid-19 pandemic, other ways had to be found in order to carry out the experiment. Thus, the students were informed via *Classroom* that volunteers were needed to participate in a research study for an end-of-degree project. The result was that 20 boys and girls showed interest in this study. In order to assure that the session would be able to be developed as close as possible as it would have been carried out in their classroom, they were divided into two groups and they were summoned in two different time zones¹ to attend a virtual class using the *Meet* tool on *Classroom*. The procedure followed with each group was exactly the same.

¹ The group that was summoned first was the one that watched the episode with subtitles and the one summoned afterwards was the group that watched it without subtitles.

To begin with, they were given some instructions to be followed before the session: they were asked to have headphones ready (if needed), no mobile phones were allowed in the room during the session and they had to make sure that no one was going to interrupt them for an hour. Having all set, each group was asked to open the file or link that contained the episode at the same time. Other instructions given to them were that they should watch the film as they would normally do at home. In this sense, no specific instructions about the subtitles (whether they were supposed to read them or not) were given to the first group of participants. After viewing the episode, they completed the content comprehension questions on the episode they had just watched, as it has already been pointed out. It should be noted that the participants were not informed about the aim of this study until the end of their corresponding sessions, so as not to interfere in their performance during the experiment. They were told that it was not an exam, but that it was an important study and that they should be concentrated on the task and give their best during the whole process.

4.4.2 Scoring and Data analysis

Scores were given to the test they answered. Each item answered correctly was given one point, so the maximum score a student could obtain was 18. None of the wrong questions scored negatively. In exercises 1 and 2, the maximum score they could get was five points on each exercise and, in exercise 3, they could obtain a maximum of 8 points and a minimum of 2 points.

5 RESULTS

5.1 Results

After collecting the data, the results of both groups in the comprehension test were compared. The maximum score on this test was 18 points. In order to have a broad view of their global performance, the average of the total scores were calculated and they were then adjusted to a scale of 10. After that, the average results on each exercise were also calculated and compared, as shown in figure 3.

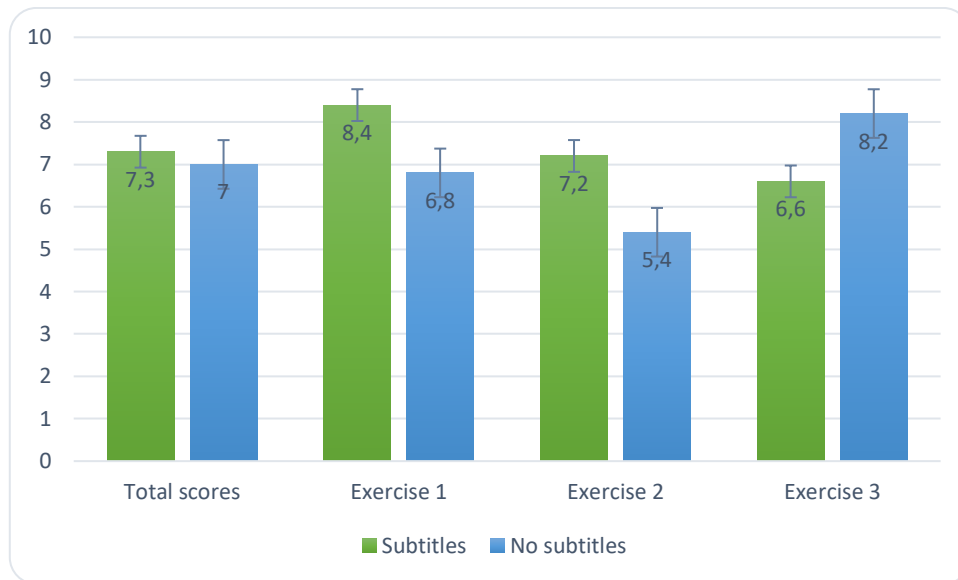


Figure 3. Total scores and average results on each exercise for each group.

The results of the whole questionnaire show that there is no significant difference concerning the degree of comprehension of group 1 and that of group 2² (7.3 in front of 7). Regarding the results on each exercise, it is worth mentioning that on exercise 1, the students struggled in different questions. In other words, the most frequently failed answers were different in both groups. On exercise 2, both groups underperformed as compared to exercise 1. The average results, as figure 1 conveys, was 7.2 out of 10 for group 1 and 5.4 out of 10 for group 2. On exercise 3, group 2 performed better than group 1, the average results being 8.2 out of 10, in contrast to 6.6 out of 10, as obtained by group 1. As it has already been mentioned, the aim of this exercise was to put into the right order the sequence of events of the episode.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Standard Deviation
Total	10	4.40	9.40	7.2800	1.37340
Ex. 1	10	6.00	10.00	8.4000	1.26491
Ex. 2	10	2.00	10.00	7.2000	2.34758
Ex. 3	10	3.80	10.00	6.6400	2.55873
N valid (as on chart)	10				

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (group 1)

² From now on, the group that watched the episode with subtitles is going to be referred to as group 1 and the group that watched it without subtitles is going to be referred to as group 2.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Median	Standard Deviation
Total	10	3.30	8.90	6.9800	1.54474
Ex. 1	10	4.00	10.00	6.8000	2.14994
Ex. 2	10	2.00	10.00	7.2000	2.34758
Ex. 3	10	3.80	10.00	6.6400	2.55873
N valid (as on chart)	10				

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics (group 2)

After this first approach to the results, Mann-Whitney *U* Tests were performed in order to check whether there were significant differences between groups (in the total final scores and the scores for each exercise), as shown on table 1 and table 2. No significant differences were found in the final comprehension test scores ($Z=-4.96$, $p=.620$) or in any of the exercises: T/F ($Z=-1.750$, $p=.080$), MC ($Z=.000$, $p=1.000$) and ordering exercise ($Z=.000$, $p=1.000$).

6 DISCUSSION

This study aimed at whether the presence of L2 subtitles facilitate content comprehension of TV viewing. The main hypothesis was, following the results obtained by Birulés-Muntané and Soto-Faraco (2016), Etemadi (2012) and Vulchanova et al. (2015), that the group with subtitles would outperform the group with no-subtitles, but the results on the comprehension tests showed no significant difference in the performance of both groups (7,3 in front of 7 in the average results of the whole test, as mentioned before). On exercises 1 and 2, group 1 got better results, whereas on exercise 3, group 2 outperformed group 1. As regards to exercise 1, both groups manifested that they had found it difficult to remember the details specified on each question, as they considered the questions focused on tiny details they had not paid attention to. On exercise 2, the students who watched the episode with no-subtitles stated that they had had trouble with understanding what was being said in some of the passages chosen for the questions. As for exercise 3, group 2 seems to have had a better overall catch of the sequences than group 1. A reason behind that, as Taylor (2005, p. 426) suggests, might be that students can be “distracted

by the use of captions”. Thus, it can be feasible to think that the group with subtitles got distracted and that prevented them from obtaining better results.

Moreover, Taylor (2005, p. 426) specifically refers to students with “little background in reading and listening in the target language” as a barrier to getting benefits from watching multimedia with L2 subtitles. In this case, the students’ level of proficiency was presumably pre-intermediate, which means that their English level cannot be considered as very high. That may also lead to support the idea that the use of subtitles in students with low proficiency levels does not really help them to have a better content comprehension. In this sense, Taylor (2005, p. 423) affirms that “the majority of the studies in captioning have used intermediate to advanced students and in fact there appears to be a consensus that captioning can only be effective at the higher proficiency levels.” Kathen, Lin, Fox and Chun (2002) also stand for this thesis, as they claim that:

But for those with low English proficiency levels or for slow readers in EFL contexts, English subtitles still do not provide much help because students cannot keep up with the rapid speed of spoken English aimed primarily at English native speakers.

It should be mentioned that the participants did not take a placement test before participating in this study. It was assumed that they all had roughly the same level of English, but there is no objective evidence to reach this conclusion, as some of them take afterschool lessons of English or have been to the UK to study English in summer. Therefore, if all of the participants were exactly at the same level of proficiency, the results would probably be different.

It could be considered that the difference in the results would have been more significant, if the subtitles used had been in L1 instead of L2, as some authors consider that L1 subtitles can be more favourable for students with lower levels of English. But, as mentioned in the introduction and literature review, which condition is better has been a controversial issue among researchers. So, it cannot be assured that watching them in L1 would have meant better results.

Markham et al (2001, p. 444) affirm that, “intermediate and lower-level students typically have a great deal of trouble understanding rapid, authentic native-speaker oral discourse in a movie or video until they have had considerable exposure to it”. They suggest, following Koskinen et al. (1996), a sequence to be followed in order to make this

input more comprehensible for lower-level learners. This sequence would involve the following: to watch a video with L1 subtitles, to watch it again with L2 subtitles and, finally, to watch it with no subtitles. This way, Markham et al (2001) conclude that:

The above sequence supports the comprehension of challenging material by allowing these students to use stronger native-language reading skills first; followed by using their emerging but somewhat weaker, target-language reading skills. Finally, the students would be ready to rely totally on their usually much weaker target-language listening skills. (p. 444)

In further research, this could be an option to work on in order to investigate more deeply the role of subtitles in terms of content comprehension.

Some limitations for the present study could be the number of participants and their proficiency level of English (as already mentioned). Concerning the number of participants, since the study was conducted with 20 students, results might be different with more participants. Other limitation could be that interviews were not conducted afterwards to check whether they actually read the subtitles or whether they were distracting. This could have been a useful piece of information in order to prove the role subtitles played during the viewing of the episode. It can also be considered that a more specific test would have captured aspects that one group understood, and the other did not.

To conclude, it is important to bear in mind that this is just an explanatory study with one episode. Thus, these students may not be familiar with this form of TV watching. Furthermore, after regularly watching subtitled series over a longer period or after watching them with L1 subtitles, results may vary.

7 CONCLUSION

Multimedia and the great power that it has over teenagers should be explored and considered by teachers in order to make it a more powerful motivational and learning tool. Multimedia has got many ingredients to make language learning meaningful and successful, but it has to be used efficiently. In order to do so, further research on the use of subtitles and the absence of them should be done.

Although this study's outcome does not show a big difference on content comprehension results when watching a TV series with L2 subtitles or without them, following previous research done on the matter, as referred to in the introduction and literature review, show the opposite. In this sense, a wide range of authors believe (and have proven) that L2 subtitles enhance content comprehension.

Further study on different proficiency levels can be carried out in order to investigate whether subtitles in L2 have different effects on the participants, since results may be different when targeting to other proficiency levels. Yet, it should not be forgotten that most of the studies have been addressed to older learners, so further research on teenagers is needed so as to investigate the effects of long-term exposure to multimedia with L2 subtitles.

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9 APPENDIX A

Comprehension test: “The Fairest of Them All”

1. Marca si estos enunciados son verdaderos (V) o falsos (F).

V / F El Sr Moseby no se fía de la madre de Brianna.

V / F London ganó el concurso de belleza en 1998.

V / F Tyreesha deja el concurso de belleza para hacer un curso de astrología.

V / F Con el dinero del premio, Rebecca querría abrir un hospital para mascotas.

V / F De pequeña, London quería ser modelo.

2. Escoge la respuesta correcta (A, B o C).

¿Por qué los gemelos quieren unas bicicletas nuevas?

A) Porque han visto unas en un anuncio que les han gustado mucho.

B) Porque sus amigos se han comprado bicis nuevas y ellos también quieren.

C) Porque las que tienen no les gustan.

¿De qué se conocen Carey y Tim?

A) Cantaban juntos en un crucero.

B) Trabajaron en el mismo bar de copas.

C) Fueron pareja durante un tiempo.

¿Por qué Zack y Cody se esperan en la entrada del concurso de belleza?

A) Para hacer un regalo a una concursante.

B) Para colarse en el concurso sin que el Sr Moseby se entere.

C) Para conseguir besos de las concursantes.

¿Qué come en realidad la madre de Brianna?

A) Una pastilla de jabón rosa.

B) Caramelos de color rosa.

C) Pétalos de rosa.

¿Por qué Tim no fue al concierto de Carey?

- A) Porque tenía que presentar el concurso de belleza.
- B) Porque se le perdió la ropa que tenía que ponerse.
- C) Porque tenía que doblar calcetines.

3. Ordena cronológicamente (de 1 a 8) estos hechos que pasan en el capítulo que acabas de ver. El '1' y el '5' te pueden servir de guía para ordenar los demás.

- _____ Carey acepta hacer un dúo con Tim.
- 5 _____ London visita a las participantes con Maddie para darles consejo e información del concurso.
- _____ El Sr Moseby quiere que Zack y Cody se queden en sus habitaciones para no estorbar a los clientes del hotel.
- _____ Las participantes del concurso van a una fiesta de pijamas en la habitación de Brianna.
- _____ El héroe de Tyreesha es George Washington.
- _____ Cody se esconde debajo del saco de dormir.
- 1 _____ El episodio empieza con Carey y los gemelos discutiendo sobre bicicletas.
- _____ Rebecca gana el concurso de belleza.